

## Article

# Athlete Portraits in News: Influence of Media Representation and Gender on Social Perception

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### Abstract

Previous literature suggests that in masculinized domains, a stereotypical portrayal of women has a negative impact on society's perception of them. However, the influence of media representation on people's perceptions of athletes depending on their gender, as well as its possible consequences for both men and women, remains unexplored in the sports sphere. Through two experimental studies employing a scenario methodology, we aimed to address this gap in the literature: In Study 1 ( $N = 190$ ), we tested the influence of the media's representation (focused on the professional field vs. extraprofessional field) and the athlete's gender (man vs. woman) on perceptions, and in Study 2 ( $N = 625$ ), we examined the effect of gender for an athlete receiving media coverage focused on the extraprofessional field. Study 1's results showed that when media representation was based on the professional (vs. extraprofessional) field, participants perceived the news as more credible, believed that the media valued the athlete's capacity to a greater extent, and attributed more merit to the athlete. Moreover, Study 2, focused on an extraprofessional field, indicated that when a man athlete (vs. woman athlete) was portrayed, participants were more likely to consider the news content accurate, which, in turn, was associated with a higher attribution of competence to the athlete and a higher intention to consume sports media in the future. The study will hopefully help reduce beliefs about existing stereotypes as well as discrimination against women, whether in sports or in any other field (e.g., professionally or in education).

**Keywords:** experimental study; gender stereotypes; media; social perception; sport

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Despite the increasing presence of women in most sporting disciplines, sports have traditionally been characterized by gender discrimination (Hyre et al., 2017; Lough & Mumcu, 2016). In comparison with men, women have encountered biological, sporting, educational, sociocultural, economic, and moral barriers that have limited their participation in sport (Delgado et al., 2018). The structure of sport encourages an intrinsic mechanism of society through its images, ideologies, and structures that legitimize and maintains the differences between genders (Gómez-Colell et al., 2017).

Media historically have contributed to this marginalization of women in sport (Europa Press Deportes, 2023). For instance, the media coverage of women athletes is discrete or even nonexistent (Salido-Fernández & Muñoz-Muñoz, 2021). Furthermore, when women athletes are presented in the media, it tends to be from an androcentric viewpoint—that is, the focus is on extraprofessional aspects associated with femininity (e.g., attractiveness, romantic

relationships, role as mother or wife) instead of their professional capacity as athletes (Martínez-Abajo et al., 2020; Rojas-Torrijos, 2010). This representation of women in various fields by the media has harmed the public's view of them, especially when they are presented in a stereotypically masculine domain, where their ability or competence is often put on trial (e.g., Barthel & Ayd, 2016; Daniels & Zurbriggen, 2016). However, the same negative effects on the perception of competence do not seem to be produced when a man, for example, receives sexualized treatment (i.e., based on his physical attractiveness): men are valued as equally competent even if the news is covered in a sexualized way (Barthel & Ayd, 2016).

Although previous research has examined the consequences of stereotypical treatment of information in various contexts, the results found to date are not conclusive; more research is needed in this area. Likewise, in the sports field, the effect of the media's representation (focused on the extraprofessional vs. the professional field) based on the athlete's gender on audiences' perception and behavior has not been examined. The present research delves into this question by testing whether presenting women athletes (vs. men athletes) based on their extraprofessional aspects (i.e., attractiveness and romantic relationships) generates a more negative social perception of them. Likewise, this work is aimed at understanding the psychological mechanisms underlying the differential perception of men and women athletes when the sports

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media focus coverage of news on the extraprofessional field (i.e., attractiveness and romantic relationships).

#### *Media Representation in Sport and Its Consequences*

International research has shown that the evolution of societal gender roles changes the stereotypes' perceptions about men and women (e.g., Diekmann & Eagly, 2000; Koenig & Eagly, 2014). Moreover, several studies conducted in the Spanish context (García-Retamero *et al.*, 2011; López-Zafra & García-Retamero, 2021) suggest that the female stereotype is more dynamic because the roles women adopt in their societies have changed more than those of men. However, the image of women athletes in the media in the Spanish context is still sexist because it is based on gender stereotypes and the sexualization of women.

The media have significant influence on people's lives and their perceptions of the world around them (Shedlosky-Shoemaker *et al.*, 2011). According to the cultivation theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976), the more time people spend living in the world of media, the easier it will be for them to believe that social reality resembles the reality portrayed in the media. Thus, public opinion is closely linked to the media's representation of information and how it is covered in the news (D'Adamo & García, 2003). In this respect, the media continue to explain women's reality from an androcentric point of view (Furnham *et al.*, 2006). Information referring to women and their activities frequently relies on gender stereotypes (Gómez-Colell *et al.*, 2017), that is, the characteristics or attributes associated with individuals according to their gender (Eagly, 1987). Following the stereotype content model (Fiske *et al.*, 2002), women are traditionally perceived as very warm and not very competent (i.e., warm, friendly, and supportive), whereas men are perceived as very competent and not very warm (i.e., assertive, independent, and competitive). Through these stereotypes, people evaluate, perceive, and judge individuals based on their gender, consequently manifesting certain emotions and behaviors toward them (Fiske *et al.*, 2002).

The consequences of this stereotypical way of perceiving the world are manifested in various environments and contexts (Fiske, 1998; Fiske *et al.*, 2002). In particular, gender stereotypes are very present in media coverage of sports (Knight & Giuliano, 2001). According to the Division for the Advancement of Women from the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (División para el Adelanto de la Mujer del Departamento de Asuntos Económicos y Sociales de la Secretaría de las Naciones Unidas, 2007), women are sexualized and shown by the media in a format that increases gender-based stereotypes. Frequent depictions of them as passive subjects rather than active competitors in their sport echo the historic and stereotypical representation of women in sports media (Jones, 2006). Consequently, coverage of women's sports is inferior to that of men's not only in quantity but also in quality (Duncan & Messner, 2000). Sports commentators and journalists often explicitly allude to a woman athlete's attractiveness, emotionality, and private life (e.g., romantic relationships or motherhood), whereas men athletes are represented in terms of their sporting ability (i.e., powerful, relentless, dominant; Rojas-Torrijos, 2010). Men are therefore easily represented by the media as athletes because this characteristic is consistent with the traditional male role (Coakley & White, 1992). However, for women, being an athlete contradicts the traditional female role, and hence, media coverage emphasizes other aspects of their "femininity," which relegates them to a position of inferiority in the sports field. These microaggressions tend to be invisible

because they are subtle in nature and may not be considered forms of discrimination in a society that views sport as a male domain (Kaskan & Ho, 2016). However, these are forms of discrimination and violence against women that illustrate the existing sexism in today's society, which is defined as a set of attitudes and beliefs based on gender stereotypes that express the devaluation of women in relation to men (Moya-Morales, 2004).

A body of empirical literature has focused on analyzing the media's portrayal of athletes and its consequences (e.g., Gómez-Colell *et al.*, 2017; Mudrick *et al.*, 2017). Specifically, several researchers have suggested that sexualized representations of individuals in the media, where their physical attractiveness is highlighted, have significant effects on the way people perceive them and value the media (e.g., Daniels & Zurbriggen, 2016; Nezlak *et al.*, 2015). In this respect, Daniels and Wartena (2011) found that people neither had favorable impressions of athletes nor liked media coverage about them when attractiveness was the main focus. Similarly, Knight and Giuliano (2001) observed in a sample of adolescents that when attractiveness was the focus of the article, people liked the article less than when the coverage focused on the athletic ability of the athlete. Moreover, these authors also found that adolescents remarked on the performance of athletes' physical competence when the athletic context was depicted in the photograph, and they focused on the physical appearance and attractiveness of the athletes and models when they were sexualized.

At this point, it is worth noting that this inadequate treatment of information by the media does not seem to affect men and women homogeneously. In this respect, Glick *et al.* (2005) reported that men and woman raters reacted negatively toward sexy businesswomen in a high-status profession and rated them as less competent. Similarly, in an experimental study, Daniels and Zurbriggen (2016) evaluated adolescents' and young women's perceptions about a girl depending on whether she was presented in a sexualized or nonsexualized profile photo on Facebook. Their findings highlighted that the woman target was perceived as less socially and physically attractive and less task-competent when she was presented in a sexualized way (vs. nonsexualized). Similarly, Barthel and Ayd (2016) also observed in an experiment with undergraduate students that women in objectified photos on Facebook were rated as less competent than women in non-objectified photos. However, the authors did not find this effect with regard to men's photos: men's competence scores remained constant regardless of whether the photo was objectified.

These findings suggest that the sexualized image of women in the public field and, particularly, in stereotypically male domains is negatively perceived by society, and in comparison with men, the relational and labor costs could be higher for women. However, to the best of our knowledge, previous literature has not examined in the sport sphere how the type of information presented by the media (i.e., whether the media's representation is focused on the extraprofessional field vs. the professional field) may affect people's perceptions of athletes depending on their gender and whether the effects of the type of representation determine different costs for men and women athletes. Based on previous literature, it would be reasonable to think that a news treatment focused on extraprofessional aspects (e.g., attractiveness or romantic relationships) would be associated with a more negative perception of athletes in terms of competence and that this effect would be stronger for women (vs. men) athletes. Addressing this issue will guide part of this research.

A current example of sexism in the sports media is shown by the writer Itziar Mínguez Arnáiz, who wrote the following opinion of networks that was meant to inspire a real revolution:

#### THE NOBODIES

They have said – in reference to Nadal’s triumph – in the TV news of La 1: “The best of all time. 21 Grand Slams. NOBODY has it.” Here are three nobodies: Margaret Court (24), Serena Williams (23) and Steffi Graf (22). They are women. They are somebody. Let’s talk properly.

Taking into account this research contributes approaches to understanding how the media influence the social perception of sports news, we consider opinions such as Itziar’s essential that make visible the gender discrimination that sports media sometimes show when presenting their news.

On the other hand, empirical research suggests that social knowledge that is incidentally activated when one reads words or imagines events subsequently affects participants’ behaviors across a range of ostensibly unrelated domains (Ferguson & Bargh, 2003), such as, for example, the influence of the media representation on the behavior of the people who consume such media can be. For example, previous studies have indicated that an organization’s social activities through media can be a key element in how consumers view the organization (Brown et al., 2006), and the consumption intention can be increased as a function of such behaviors (Klein & Dawar, 2004). More specifically, Sartore-Baldwin and Walker (2011) found that the media coverage of a socially responsible initiative by the National Association for Stock Car Racing (NASCAR) aimed at developing minority and women drivers for NASCAR competitions influenced consumers’ intentions. In this respect, although favorable predisposition toward the consumption of sport practiced by women has been identified in some studies (Mujika-Alberdi et al., 2021), in the sport field little attention has been paid to how the media’s representation can negatively affect consumption intention or to possible differences in this cost depending on the gender of the athlete.

#### Overview Research

Based on the literature background, we conducted two experimental studies to examine the potential impact of media portrayal in sports news (focused on the extraprofessional field [i.e., the athlete’s attractiveness and romantic relationship] vs. the professional field) and the athlete’s gender (man vs. woman) on individuals’ perceptions of such news.

Following a scenario methodology, we created various fictional sports news stories in the context of tennis as a function of our manipulated variables (i.e., media representation and athlete gender). We chose tennis for this study because previous researchers have suggested that it is commonly perceived as a neutral sport (e.g., Gebel et al., 2022; Hively & El-Alayli, 2014; Paserman, 2007). Moreover, tennis is a globally popular sport boasting 87 million players, 47% being women (International Tennis Federation, 2019). In Spain, there were over 83,000 registered tennis players in 2022, with 42,740 in the women’s category (Statista Research Department, 2023). Additionally, the 1973 US Open marked a historic moment, being the first Grand Slam tournament to introduce equal prize money for woman and man tennis players (Gebel et al., 2022). These data align with the notion that tennis is perceived as a gender-neutral sport.

In Study 1, we tested whether a media representation focused on the professional field (vs. the extraprofessional field) and portraying a man tennis player (vs. woman tennis player) was associated with a greater perception of the news item’s credibility, a higher belief that

the athlete’s capacity is valued in the news story, and a higher belief that the tennis player won the tournament based on his merits. Once the effect of media representation on the participants’ perception of sports news had been evidenced, in Study 2, we focused on extraprofessional media representation and manipulated the athlete’s gender. Specifically, we tested whether a man tennis player (vs. woman tennis player) receiving media representation focused on the extraprofessional field (i.e., his physical attractiveness and romantic relationship) was associated with a higher perception of the news item’s credibility, a greater perception of appropriateness of the information contained in the news, a higher belief that the tennis player won the tournament based on his merits, a greater attribution of sport competence to the athlete, and a higher intention to consume similar sports media in the future.

On the other hand, the media have argued that what the audience wants is coverage consistent with the stereotypical gender role (Kane, 1996; Morrison & Shaffer, 2003). However, no known studies focus on examining how the people’s evaluation of coverage content could be a key explicative element. That is, whether the degree to which people perceive coverage to be appropriate might explain the observed differences in social perceptions of men and women athletes who are represented in terms of their extraprofessional life. Therefore, in Study 2, we address this question by considering the audience’s appraisal of the news content as a potential mediating factor. In this respect, previous findings suggest that men are perceived as competent in stereotypically masculine domains regardless of the type of information provided by the media (e.g., Barthel & Aydt, 2016). As a result, it would be expected that when a man athlete (vs. woman) is presented in terms of physical attractiveness or personal life, the audience would perceive the information contained in the news to be credible and appropriate to a greater extent because it is a traditionally masculine domain and the male stereotype (e.g., athletic, competent, dominant) prevails regardless of media coverage. Besides, this could lead to a more positive perception of the athlete in terms of his sporting competence and a greater proclivity to consume that sports media. Therefore, in Study 2, we also tested whether a man tennis player (vs. woman tennis player) receiving media representation focused on the extraprofessional field was associated with a greater attribution of sport competence to the athlete and a higher intention to consume similar sports media in the future via a higher belief that the media treated the information appropriately.

To test these research questions, we controlled for the effect of gender and sexist attitudes in both studies. According to the social role theory (Eagly, 1987; Eagly et al., 2004), gender socialization may explain differences in how women and men behave and perceive situations of violence: Whereas women generally seem to express their disagreement more sensibly in the face of discrimination and gender-based violence (Sylaska & Walters, 2014; Wood & Eagly, 2002), men tend to believe that women may deserve sexist and violent treatment in certain situations (Expósito et al., 1998). Similarly, researchers have considered sexist attitudes based on stereotypes and gender roles potential factors negatively influencing individuals’ perceptions of women athletes and contributing to the perpetuation of gender inequality in sports (e.g., Mudrick et al., 2017; Whisenant et al., 2015). On the other hand, although results are inconclusive, some authors have suggested that perceivers’ age affects fundamental processes of social perception (see Freund & Isaacowitz, 2014). Therefore, we also controlled for the effect of participants’ age in both studies.



## Study 1

Study 1 was aimed at examining the effect of the media representation (focused on the extraprofessional field vs. the professional field) and the athletes' gender (men vs. women) on the participants' perception of the news credibility (i.e., perception of the news item's credibility), the athlete's capacity attributed by the media (i.e., the belief that the athlete's capacity is valued in the news story), and the athlete's merit (i.e., the belief that the tennis player won the tournament on her/his merits). We expected the participants to consider news to be more credible (Hypothesis 1a), believe the media value an athlete's capacity to a greater extent (Hypothesis 1b), and award more merit for winning a tournament (Hypothesis 1c) when the news is described with a focus on the professional field compared to when it is focused on the extraprofessional field (i.e., the athlete's attractiveness and romantic relationship). Similarly, we expected the participants to consider news more credible (Hypothesis 2a), believe the media value an athlete's capacity to a greater extent (Hypothesis 2b), and award more merit for winning a tournament (Hypothesis 2c) when the athlete is a man (vs. woman). Finally, we expected to find that when the news is described with a focus on the extraprofessional field (vs. the professional field) and the athlete is a woman (vs. men) participants will attribute less credibility to the news (Hypothesis 3a), believe less that the media values the athlete's sporting capacity (Hypothesis 3b), and ascribe less merit for winning the tournament (Hypothesis 3c).

## Method

### Participants

The initial sample consisted of 200 participants from the general population (50% women,  $n = 100$ ) who volunteered to participate. Ten participants were removed from the data analyses because they responded incorrectly to the manipulation checks. Thus, the final sample was composed of 190 participants (50.5% women,  $n = 96$ ; 49.5% men,  $n = 94$ ) with an average age of 31.08 years ( $SD = 14.26$ , range 18–63).

### Procedure and Design

We conducted this research after receiving approval from the Ethics Committee of the University of Granada (approval number: 3328/CEIH/2021). Informed consent was obtained from all participants at the start of the survey. The data was collected through incidental sampling in various public places (e.g., universities, bus stations, public parks, or libraries) throughout the city of [blinded]. As an inclusion criteria, participants had to be over 18 years of age. First, a researcher was trained to give the participants appropriate instructions and to carry out the study. All of the participants were assured that their information and responses would remain anonymous and confidential. In addition, they were informed that their participation in this research was voluntary and that they could quit the study at any time. After the participants provided consent in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, they were randomly assigned to one of the experimental conditions and were given approximately 15 min to complete a questionnaire in paper-pencil format with the measures of interest in only one session. Once the participants had completed the questionnaire, they were informed of the study's objectives and thanked for their collaboration. We collected the data during May and June 2019.

We implemented a between-subjects 2 (media representation: Focused on the extraprofessional field vs. the professional field) ×

2 (athlete's gender: Man vs. woman) factorial design through the scenario manipulation technique. Numerous studies related to various types of sexist violence have used fictitious scenarios in their methodology (e.g., Herrera Enríquez & Expósito Jiménez, 2009; Romero-Sánchez et al., 2012). Specifically, we recreated different fictitious sports news stories as a function of the media representation and the athletes' gender, using the previous research by Knight and Giuliano (2001) and real sexist sports news stories as our basis to give them more realism<sup>1</sup>. More specifically, we relied on sports news that describes women athletes using adjectives related to their nonprofessional characteristics (e.g., hotties and physical attractiveness, romantic relationships, maternity), which helped us build our experimental conditions. In this way, the participants were exposed to one of the fictitious news stories corresponding with the experimental manipulation, and then they answered several dependent measures (news focused on the extraprofessional field–man athlete condition:  $n = 46$ ; news focused on the extraprofessional field–woman athlete condition:  $n = 44$ ; news focused on the professional field–man athlete condition:  $n = 50$ ; and news focused on the professional field–woman athlete condition:  $n = 50$ ).

### Measures

*The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory.* We administered the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Spanish version of Expósito et al., 1998) to measure participants' sexist attitudes. This inventory consisted of 22 items distributed in two subscales: *Hostile sexism* (HS; 11 items, e.g., “Women always exaggerate the problems they have at work”) and *benevolent sexism* (BS; 11 items, e.g., “Women are endowed with a purity that few men possess”). Participants answered using a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*totally disagree*) to 5 (*totally agree*) so that higher scores indicated greater sexist attitudes. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  values obtained for this sample were .92 for HS and .83 for BS.

*Experimental Condition.* The basis of the news story that included the manipulation of the athlete's gender was “Tennis player María Rodríguez (woman condition)/Antonio González (man condition) won her/his third Grand Slam last weekend.” Next, the following conditions were used for the manipulation of the media representation. The news story for the condition focused on the extraprofessional field was as follows:

The 27-year-old Spanish player, famous for her/his physical attractiveness, was superior in the duel after 2 hr, beating her/his rival in all sets. This was the finishing touch she/he needed to finish off the tournament. Is it the beginning of her/his new relationship with her/his coach that has given her/him the strength to obtain this victory? María/Antonio confirms feeling more willing than ever to continue competing.

The news story for the condition focused on the professional field was as follows:

The Spanish player, champion of several prestigious tournaments during her/his fantastic professional career, was superior in the duel after 2 hr, beating her/his rival in all sets. This was the finishing touch she/he needed to finish off the tournament. María/Antonio confirms feeling more willing than ever to continue competing.

*News Credibility.* Using measures from a study by Mudrick et al. (2017), we evaluated the news story's credibility through the item, “To what extent do you think the way of describing the news is

<sup>1</sup> For example, <https://elpais.com/smoda/los-8-titulares-mas-machistas-de-los-juegos-olimpicos-de-rio.html>

credible?" The response format was a Likert-type scale that ranged from 1 (*not credible*) to 5 (*absolutely credible*).

*Valuation of Capacity by the Media.* We used an item based on Knight and Giuliano (2001) to assess the media's valuation of the athlete's ability. This item varied as a function of the experimental condition: "To what extent do you consider María (woman condition)/Antonio (man condition) to be valued for her/his capacity as an athlete in this news story?" A 5-point Likert-type response format was used, ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*completely*).

*Attribution of Merit.* We used the previous research by Knight and Giuliano (2001) as our basis for measuring the attribution of merit for winning a tournament. According to the experimental condition, one of the following items was used: "To what extent do you think the tennis player won the tournament on her (woman condition)/his (man condition) own merits?" The response format was a Likert-type scale that ranged from 1 (*she/he did not win on her/his own merits at all*) to 5 (*she/he totally won on her/his own merits*).

*Manipulation Check.* Two items with a dichotomous response format were used to verify the effectiveness of the experimental manipulation. For the independent variable (IV) of the media representation, we asked, "How does the news describe the athlete?" (*27 years old, famous for his/her physical attractiveness, and having a relationship with his/her coach vs. the champion of several prestigious tournaments during his/her fantastic professional career*), whereas for the IV of the athlete's gender, we developed the item, "Did the news that you have just read talk about a man or a woman?" (*man vs. woman*).

*Sociodemographic Characteristics.* Data about the participants' gender ("What is your gender? Man/Women/Other [specify]") and age ("What is your age?") were collected.

#### Statistical Analysis Strategy

Using G\*Power (Faul et al., 2009; Version 3.1.9.4), we conducted a sensitivity power analysis with this sample ( $N = 190$ ;  $1 - \beta = 80\%$ ;  $\alpha = .05$ ) using a two-way ANCOVA with 4 groups, one degree of freedom, and four covariates (i.e., gender, age, hostile and benevolent sexism). According to Cohen's effect size conventions (1962;  $p = .348$ ;  $\geq .10/.25/.40$  indicates small/medium/large effects), the design could detect a small-medium effect size,  $f^2 = .24$ ; that is, the magnitude of the differences found in the study could be small-medium.

Data analysis was carried out using the program SPSS (Version 23). To examine our predictions about the influence of the media representation (Hypothesis 1), the athlete's gender (Hypothesis 2), and their interaction effect (Hypothesis 3) on the social perceptions of a sports news story, we carried out a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA). The media representation (1 = *focused on the extraprofessional field*; 2 = *focused on the professional field*) and the athlete's gender (1 = *man*; 2 = *woman*) were included as the IVs, and the perception of credibility, valuation of the athlete's capacity, and attribution of merits were included as the dependent variables (DVs). Finally, we included the participants' gender, age, and sexist attitudes as covariates. Effect sizes were calculated with the eta partial squared coefficient ( $\geq .01/.06/.14$  indicate small/medium/large effects; Cohen, 1988). All research data and scripts are publicly available and can be accessed at the Open Science Framework<sup>2</sup>.

## Results

### Manipulation Check

Regarding the media representation IV, 90% ( $n = 90$ ) of the participants exposed to the news focused on the extraprofessional field responded correctly to the manipulation check item (i.e., indicated that the athlete was described as "27 years old, famous for his/her physical attractiveness, and having a relationship with his/her coach"), whereas 10% ( $n = 10$ ) provided an incorrect response. In contrast, 100% ( $n = 100$ ) of the participants who were exposed to the news based on the professional field accurately identified the manipulation check item by indicating that the person was described as "the champion of several prestigious tournaments during his/her fantastic professional career." Concerning the athlete's gender IV, all participants correctly identified their experimental condition. Ten participants who responded incorrectly to the manipulation checks were excluded from the data analyses.

### Effects of Media Representation and Athlete's Gender on the Social Perception of a Sports News Story

The results showed that the media representation significantly influenced the perceived credibility of the news,  $F(1, 189) = 129.91, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .417$ . Specifically, the participants belonging to the condition focused on the professional field perceived the news as more credible ( $M = 4.09, SD = 0.93$ ) compared to the participants in the condition highlighting the extraprofessional field ( $M = 2.37, SD = 1.16$ ). Similarly, the media representation significantly affected the valuation of the athlete's capacity by the media,  $F(1, 189) = 297.13, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .620$ , that is, the participants who read the news item focused on an athlete's professional field ( $M = 4.31, SD = 0.79$ ) believed that the media valued the athlete's capacity to a greater extent than those who read the news highlighting the extraprofessional aspects ( $M = 2.04, SD = 1.03$ ). The analysis also indicated a significant effect on the attribution of merit for winning a tournament,  $F(1, 189) = 18.35, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .092$ , meaning that media representation focused on the professional field ( $M = 4.51, SD = 0.67$ ) involved a greater attribution of merit to the athlete than representation focused on athlete's extraprofessional aspects ( $M = 3.91, SD = 1.19$ ). These findings supported Hypotheses 1a, b, and c, respectively.

Regarding the athlete's gender IV, the results showed it did not affect the perceived credibility of the news,  $F(1, 189) = 0.19, p = .67, \eta_p^2 = .001$ ; therefore, we rejected Hypothesis 2a. In contrast, the athlete's gender significantly influenced the valuation of the athlete's capacity by the media,  $F(1, 189) = 4.53, p = .035, \eta_p^2 = .024$ . Specifically, the participants who were allocated to the man condition ( $M = 3.34, SD = 1.45$ ) believed that the media valued the athlete's capacity to a greater extent compared to those in the woman condition ( $M = 3.13, SD = 1.45$ ), supporting Hypothesis 2b. Furthermore, the athlete's gender significantly affected the attribution of merit,  $F(1, 190) = 7.36, p = .007, \eta_p^2 = .039$ , showing, contrary to our predictions, that the participants attributed more merit for winning a tournament in the woman athlete condition ( $M = 4.40, SD = 0.91$ ) in comparison with the man athlete condition ( $M = 4.05, SD = 1.05$ ). Thus, we rejected Hypothesis 2c.

No significant interaction effects between the two IVs were found for the credibility of the news,  $F(1, 189) = 0.15, p = .70, \eta_p^2 = .001$ ; the valuation of the athlete's capacity by the media,  $F(1, 189) = 0.00, p = .99, \eta_p^2 = .000$ ; and attributed merits,  $F(1, 189) = 3.17, p = .08, \eta_p^2 = .017$ , disproving Hypothesis 3.

<sup>2</sup>[https://osf.io/5g4v2/?view\\_only=9c3969248a954d13ba0861bc6b6eca8e](https://osf.io/5g4v2/?view_only=9c3969248a954d13ba0861bc6b6eca8e)

As far as covariates were concerned, the participants' gender significantly affected their perception of the news story's credibility,  $F(1, 189) = 7.61, p = .006, \eta_p^2 = .040$ . That is, women perceived the news as more credible than men did,  $M_{\text{woman}} = 3.44, SD = 1.34$ ;  $M_{\text{man}} = 3.11; SD = 1.36$ . The entire statistical output is provided in Supplementary Material (Tables S2 and S3).

## Discussion

Study 1's results show that media representation focused on extraprofessional aspects such as the athlete's attractiveness and romantic relationship (vs. representation focused on the professional field) is associated with lower news credibility, lower valuation of athletes' capacity by media, and lower attribution of merit to the athlete for winning a tournament, which is in line with previous research (e.g., Gómez-Colell *et al.*, 2017; Mudrick *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, participants who were allocated to the man condition believed that the media valued the athlete's capacity to a greater extent compared to those in the woman condition. This result could be due to the fact that sport is still a stereotypically masculine context (Hyre *et al.*, 2017), so that, regardless of the media representation, it is more common that men and not women appear in such news, and therefore, the news is viewed more positively (Lough & Mumcu, 2016). In contrast to our initial prediction, participants attributed more merit for winning a tournament in the woman-athlete condition in comparison with the man-athlete condition. This phenomenon could be attributed to the heightened visibility and media coverage traditionally accorded to men in the sports domain. Consequently, when a woman wins a sports tournament, her accomplishments may be evaluated with a higher degree of merit compared to those of a man. In this sense, this attribution of greater merit to the woman athlete could derive from the belief that the woman tennis player tried harder and worked harder to win the tournament. However, could this be translated into a greater attribution of competence to the woman athlete (vs. the man athlete)? How could this affect the audience's intention to consume sports media?

The results from Study 1 regarding the effect of athlete gender were unexpected and contradicted our initial predictions. Nonetheless, Study 1 confirmed the anticipated influence of media representation on measures of perception in the context of a sports news story. For this reason, and because we were particularly interested in testing whether there are differences in the way men and women tennis players are perceived when they are portrayed in terms of physical attractiveness and their romantic relationships, in Study 2, we focused on extraprofessional media representation and only manipulated the athlete's gender. Specifically, we aimed to check whether, as the reviewed literature points out, the consequences of this inadequate treatment of information were more negative for women (e.g., Barthel & Aydt, 2016) and whether this misrepresentation had repercussions not only on the social perception of their competence as sportswomen, but also on the audience's intention to consume similar news about women athletes. In addition, in Study 2, we attempted to go a step further and explore whether the audience's appraisal of the news content was a key factor determining athletes' perception of competence and future intention to consume similar sports media.

In Study 2, we used snowball sampling through an online survey to increase the sample size and improve the ability to test our hypotheses more reliably—that is, to increase statistical power (i.e., the probability of detecting an existing effect if it is present

in the population) and reduce the risk of making Type II errors (failing to detect a real effect). In particular, with an increased sample size, we aimed to explore whether the initially nonsignificant effect of the athlete's gender on the perception of news credibility (Hypothesis 2a) would become significant, indicating a potential real effect, or whether, on the contrary, this effect would remain nonsignificant in Study 2. Similarly, increasing the sample size enabled us for more reliable results regarding the unexpected effect of athlete gender on the attribution of merit for winning the tournament.

In addition, in Study 2, we attempted to mitigate the exclusive use of single-item measures. Specifically, instead of using only the single item extracted from Knight and Giuliano's (2001) measure to assess the media's valuation of capacity, we used their complete three-item scale, which assesses news content in a broader sense (i.e., the athlete's capacity value, the information given about the athlete, and the appropriateness of the athlete's description). Moreover, in Study 2, we incorporated new variables of interest that may shed light on Study 1's findings. Specifically, we included multi-item measures evaluating the sporting competence attributed to the athlete (Balaguer *et al.*, 2008) and the future intention to consume similar media (Sartore-Baldwin & Walker, 2011). Therefore, the measures used in Study 2 provide a more comprehensive and reliable assessment of the variables of interest compared to the single-item measures used in Study 1.

## Study 2

Study 2 was aimed at analyzing the effect of the gender of an athlete receiving a media representation focused on the extraprofessional field (the athlete's attractiveness and romantic relationship) on the participants' perception of news credibility, news content evaluation, and attribution of merit. In line with the reviewed literature and our Study 1 predictions, we hypothesized that the participants would consider news more credible (Hypothesis 1a), perceive greater appropriateness of the information contained in the news (Hypothesis 1b), and award more merit for winning a tournament (Hypothesis 1c) when the athlete is a man (vs. a woman). Along the same line, we examined the effect of the athlete's gender on the perception of sporting competence and media consumption intent. Specifically, we expected that, in the man (vs. woman) athlete condition, participants would attribute greater sport competence to the athlete (Hypothesis 2a) and show higher intention to consume similar sports media in the future (Hypothesis 2b).

Finally, we examined whether the effect of an athlete's gender on the social perception of a news report focused on the athlete's extraprofessional aspect can be mediated by the perceived appropriateness of the information contained in the news report. According to the reviewed literature, we expected that, in the man (vs. woman) athlete gender condition, participants would have a greater belief that the media did a correct treatment of the information, which in turn will be associated with higher perceptions of sport competence (Hypothesis 3a) and higher intentions of future sports media consumption (Hypothesis 3b).

## Method

### Participants

Of the 967 persons who took the survey, 218 were removed because they did not complete the full questionnaire. Moreover, 60 participants



were excluded because they did not meet the inclusion criteria—being over 18 years old—, and 64 because they failed or did not respond to the manipulation check. Thus, the final sample was composed of 625 participants (64.8% women and 35.2% men) with an average age of 29.48 years ( $SD = 14.06$ , range 18–65). Of the sample, 66.9% ( $n = 418$ ) of the participants reported having completed a university degree, 5.9% ( $n = 37$ ) reported achieving postgraduate studies (master's or PhD), 10% ( $n = 65$ ) indicated having a bachelor's degree, 9% ( $n = 56$ ) reported having completed secondary school, and 7.8% ( $n = 49$ ) reported other (e.g., professional formation, medium or higher degree, non-formal training).

### Procedure and Design

The ethical approval for this study was obtained from University of Granada (Aproval Number 3328/CEIH/2021). The data was collected through a snowball sampling process. Specifically, we used the Qualtrics research platform to develop an online survey. We then disseminated it through an open-access link via email and social networking sites (i.e., Facebook, Twitter [renamed X], and WhatsApp). We collected the data during October and November 2021. Before completing the questionnaire, participants were informed of the study's purpose and the anonymity and confidentiality of their answers. After the participants provided consent in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and agreed to collaborate in the study, the Qualtrics platform randomly assigned them to one of the experimental conditions (man athlete condition:  $n = 305$ ; woman athlete condition:  $n = 320$ ). We include the “force response” option in the survey to avoid potential missing values.

We implemented a between-subjects factorial experimental design, with the IV being the athlete's gender (man vs. woman). Following a scenario methodology (see Knight & Giuliano, 2001), the participants were exposed to one of the fictitious sports news items, which varied as a function of the athlete's gender, and next, they answered the measures of interest. The time taken to complete the survey was approximately 10 min, and no monetary compensation was provided for participation. Participants were informed of the study's objectives and thanked after completing the survey.

### Instruments

*The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory.* We administered the Spanish version of the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Expósito et al., 1998). The Cronbach's Alpha values obtained in Study 2 were .91 for HS and .80 for BS.

*Experimental Condition.* The designed sports news articles that included the experimental manipulation were as follows:

The tennis player María Rodríguez (woman condition)/Antonio González (man condition) won her/his third Grand Slam last weekend. The 27-year-old Spanish player, famous for her/his physical attractiveness, was superior in the duel after 2 hr, beating her/his rival in all sets. This was the finishing touch she/he needed to finish off the tournament. Is it the beginning of her/his new relationship with her/his coach that has given her/him the strength to obtain this victory? María/Antonio confirms feeling more willing than ever to continue competing.

*News Credibility.* This measure was identical to that of Study 1 (adapted from Mudrick et al., 2017).

*News Content Evaluation.* We performed an adaptation of the measure used by Knight and Giuliano (2001) to evaluate the participant's perception of the information provided in the described sports news. This instrument was used as a replacement for the single-item measure of the valuation of capacity by the

media used in Studio 1<sup>3</sup> and to assess the evaluation of news content in a broader sense. Specifically, it consisted of three items (“Is the athlete's capacity valued?”, “Is enough information given about the athlete?”, and “Is the description of the athlete adequate?”) with a Likert-type response scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 10 (*totally*). The scale score was calculated using the average value, where high scores indicate high perception that the media describes the athlete's story adequately. In our study, we obtained a Cronbach's Alpha of .82, similar to that obtained by the authors in the development of their measure ( $\alpha = .87$ ).

*Attribution of Merit.* We used the measure in Study 1 (adapted from Knight & Giuliano, 2001).

*Perceived Sporting Competence.* To assess the sporting competence attributed to the athlete, we adapted the Perceived Competence Scale of the Intrinsic Motivation Questionnaire (McAuley et al., 1989), similar to other authors in their studies in a Spanish context (e.g., Balaguer et al., 2008). This measure consisted of 5 Likert-type items with a 5-point response scale ranging from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 5 (*totally agree*). Examples of items are: “I think the tennis player is very good at his/her sport” or “The tennis player is skilled in his/her sport.” We estimated the scale score using the average value. High scores indicated a high perception of sporting competence. This measure indicated a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of .85, similar to that obtained by the authors in the development of their scale ( $\alpha = .80$ ).

*Media Consumption Intent.* We used an adaptation of the Media Consumption Intent subscale (Sartore-Baldwin & Walker, 2011) to evaluate the participants' intention to consume sports media in the future. It consisted of 3 Likert-type items with a 7-point response scale ranging from 1 (*totally unlikely*) to 7 (*totally likely*). Specifically, the items used were: “I will read about similar sports news in current sports newspapers,” “I will visit the sports newspaper's website for information on similar news,” and “I will watch sports broadcasts to find out about similar news.” We calculated an overall average score for the scale. Higher scores indicated higher media consumption intent. The measure revealed adequate psychometric properties, showing a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of .86, the same as that obtained by the authors in the development of their scale (see Sartore-Baldwin & Walker, 2011).

*Perception of Tennis as a Masculine, Feminine, or Neutral Context.* We used one item based on Hively and El-Alayli (2014) to test whether tennis is mostly considered a neutral sport by participants, as several authors have observed in their research (Fasting et al., 2004; Gebel et al., 2022; Paserman, 2007), and to control the potential effect of such perception on the dependent measures. The response format was categorical with three alternatives (“You consider tennis to be a typically [a] masculine, [b] feminine, or [c] neutral sport”).

*Manipulation Check.* We used the following item with a dichotomous response format to verify the effectiveness of the experimental manipulation: “Did the news that you have just read talk about a man or a woman?” ([a] man or [b] woman).

*Sociodemographic Characteristics.* We asked for the participants' gender, age, highest level of completed education (“What is your highest level of education? Secondary school/Bachelor's degree/University degree/Postgraduate studies [master's or PhD]/Other”).

<sup>3</sup>An analysis of correlations showed that the measure “Valuation of Capacity by the Media” and the new proxy scale “News Content Evaluation” had a high correlation ( $r = .87$ ), suggesting conceptual overlap. Furthermore, the two variables behaved in the same way when we examined their associations with the other variables of interest (see Supplementary Material, Table S4).

### Statistical Analysis Strategy

To estimate the effect size in our sample, first, we carried out a sensitivity power analysis using G\*Power (Faul et al., 2009) with our sample ( $N = 625$ ;  $1 - \beta = 80\%$ ;  $\alpha = .05$ ) to ANCOVA with two groups, one degree of freedom, and four covariates (i.e., gender, age, hostile and benevolent sexism). The design had the ability to detect a small effect size,  $f^2 = .13$ .

Data analysis was carried out using the program SPSS (Version 23). We constructed an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) to examine our predictions about the influence of athlete's gender on the social perceptions of a sports news story. The athlete's gender (1 = man; 2 = woman) was included as the IV, and the news credibility, news content evaluation, attributed merits, sporting competence, and consumption intention were included as DVs. We included the participants' gender (1 = man; 2 = woman), age, and sexist attitudes as covariates.<sup>4</sup> Finally, we conducted two mediation analyses using Model 4 of the PROCESS program to examine whether the athlete's gender is associated with the attribution of the athlete's sporting competence and the media consumption intention based on rates of the evaluation of the news content (Hypothesis 6). We included the athlete's gender as the predictor (X), sporting competence and consumption intention as the criterion variables (Y), and the perception of the news content (M) as a mediating variable. According to Hayes' (2018) procedures for performing indirect effects, we estimated bias-corrected CIs based on 10,000 bootstrap samples. Note that participants' gender, age, and sexist attitudes were also included as covariates in the model. Following Schoemann et al. (2017), we performed a post hoc power analysis for simple mediation using Monte Carlo simulations (5,000 replications and 20,000 draws) to detect the indirect effect. The analysis showed that our sample ( $N = 625$ ) had the ability to detect the indirect effect with 97% power for sporting competence and 98% for consumption intention. Note that Study 2's data and scripts are also publicly available on OSF.

## Results

### Manipulation Check

The chi-square test revealed that 92.1% ( $n = 281$ ) of participants exposed to news about Antonio González (man condition) responded correctly to the manipulation check item by indicating the *man athlete* answer option, whereas 7.9% ( $n = 24$ ) provided an incorrect response. Similarly, 96.4% ( $n = 308$ ) of participants exposed to the news about María Rodríguez (woman condition) accurately identified the manipulation check item by selecting the *woman athlete* option, with 3.6% ( $n = 12$ ) providing an incorrect response. We excluded 36 participants who failed the manipulation check item from the analyses.

### Effects of the Athlete's Gender on the Social Perception of a Sports News Story

As in Study 1, the athlete's gender (a) did not significantly affect the credibility of the news,  $F(1, 624) = 0.39$ ,  $p = .536$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .001$ ; (b) influenced the news content evaluation in the expected

direction,  $F(1, 624) = 17.70$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .028$ ;  $M_{\text{man}} = 3.53$ ,  $SD = 2.07$ ,  $M_{\text{woman}} = 2.90$ ,  $SD = 1.83$ ; and (c) affected the attribution of merit in the opposite direction,  $F(1, 624) = 21.14$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .033$ ;  $M_{\text{woman}} = 4.48$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ,  $M_{\text{man}} = 4.09$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ . These results supported Hypothesis 1b but not Hypotheses 1a and 1c.

The results also showed a significant effect of the athlete's gender on the attributed sports competence,  $F(1, 624) = 29.49$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .045$ . Contrary to our predictions, the participants assigned to the woman condition attributed more sporting competence to the athlete than the participants belonging to the man condition,  $M_{\text{woman}} = 6.06$ ;  $SD = 1.05$ ;  $M_{\text{man}} = 5.57$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ . Therefore, we rejected Hypothesis 2a. Similarly, the experimental manipulation significantly influenced the future consumption intention of sports media in the opposite direction from what was expected,  $F(1, 624) = 5.23$ ,  $p = .023$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .008$ ; the participants who were allocated to the woman-athlete condition reported greater consumption intention of sports media than those in the man-athlete condition ( $M_{\text{woman}} = 2.85$ ;  $SD = 1.62$ ;  $M_{\text{man}} = 2.57$ ,  $SD = 1.48$ ), disproving Hypothesis 2b. We provide the entire statistical output in Supplementary Material, Table S5 and S6.

### Effect of the Athlete's Gender on the Social Perception of a Sports News Story Based on Rating of the News Content Evaluation

As shown in Tables 1 and 2, the results highlighted a statistically significant indirect effect of the athlete's gender on sporting competence,  $b = -0.07$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ , 95% CI  $[-0.12, -0.03]$ ; and the consumption intention  $b = -0.10$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ , 95% CI  $[-0.17, -0.04]$ , through the evaluation of news content. Specifically, participants allocated to the man athlete (vs. woman athlete) condition were more likely to consider the news content to be accurate, which was associated with a higher attribution of competence to the athlete and a higher intention to consume sports media in the future. These findings supported Hypothesis 3 (a and b, respectively).

The variables included in the model predicted 10.35% of the variance of the attributed sporting competence and 8.68% of the variance of the future consumption intention. The total effect of the athlete's gender was significant on both variables: Sporting competence,  $b = 0.49$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ , 95% CI  $[0.31, 0.67]$ ; and consumption intention  $b = 0.28$ ,  $SE = 0.12$ , 95% CI  $[0.04, 0.52]$ . For more information, see Supplementary Material ("Effect of the Athlete's Gender on Sport Competence and Media's Consumption Intention Based on Rates of News Content Evaluation, Covariates").

## General Discussion

The present research helps clarify the media's role in the social perception of different sports news stories, considering different psychosocial factors such as the media's representation (i.e., focused on the extraprofessional field vs. professional field), and the gender of the athlete.

Study 1's results showed that participants who read the news focused on the professional field (vs. focusing on the extraprofessional field), perceived it as more credible, believed athletic capacity was more valued, and attributed more merit for winning the tournament because the news focused on the sports aspect and not on extraprofessional-related information. Despite significant differences between groups, higher values clearly indicate a high score on the study measures; however, the lowest value indicates

<sup>4</sup>Because the correlation analysis did not yield significant relationships between tennis perception and the dependent measures, the tennis perception variable was not included as a covariate in the mediation analysis (see Supplementary Material, Table S4).



**Table 1.** Effect of Athlete’s Gender on Sporting Competence Mediated by the News Content Evaluation (Study 2)

	News content evaluation			Sporting competence		
	Coeff.	SE	Symmetric BCI	Coeff.	SE	Symmetric BCI
Constant	4.07***	0.48	[3.12, 5.02]	5.49***	0.30	[4.90, 6.08]
Athlete’s gender <sup>a</sup>	-0.63***	0.15	[-0.93, -0.34]	0.56***	0.09	[0.38, 0.73]
News content evaluation				0.11***	0.02	[0.06, 0.16]
Gender <sup>b</sup>	-0.50**	0.17	[-0.83, -0.17]	-0.14	0.10	[-0.33, 0.06]
Age	-0.01	0.005	[-0.02, 0.005]	-0.01**	0.003	[-0.02, -0.004]
Hostile sexism	0.18	0.10	[-0.01, 0.38]	-0.12*	0.06	[-0.23, -0.002]
Benevolent sexism	0.40**	0.13	[0.15, 0.66]	-0.07	0.08	[-0.23, 0.08]
	$R^2 = .10$			$R^2 = .10$		
	$F(5, 619) = 14.33, p < .001$			$F(6, 618) = 11.89, p < .001$		
	Effects		SE			Symmetric BCI
Total effect	0.49		0.09			[0.31, 0.67]
Indirect effect	-0.07		0.02			[-0.12, -0.03]

Note. *N* = 625. Symmetric BCI = symmetric bootstrapping confidence interval. Indirect effects are significant where the BCI does not include the value 0.

<sup>a</sup>1 = man, 2 = woman. <sup>b</sup>1 = men, 2 = women.

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

**Table 2.** Effect of Athlete’s Gender on the Future Consumption Intention Mediated by the News Content Evaluation (Study 2)

	News content evaluation			Consumption intention		
	Coeff.	SE	Symmetric BCI	Coeff.	SE	Symmetric BCI
Constant	4.07***	0.48	[3.12, 5.02]	1.34***	0.40	[0.55, 2.14]
Athlete’s gender <sup>a</sup>	-0.63***	0.15	[-0.93, -0.34]	0.37**	0.12	[0.14, 0.61]
News content evaluation				0.15***	0.03	[0.09, 0.21]
Gender <sup>b</sup>	-0.50**	0.17	[-0.83, -0.17]	-0.14	0.13	[-0.41, 0.12]
Age	-0.01	0.005	[-0.02, 0.005]	0.0003	0.004	[-0.01, 0.01]
Hostile sexism	0.18	0.10	[-0.01, 0.38]	0.13	0.08	[-0.02, 0.28]
Benevolent sexism	0.40**	0.13	[0.15, 0.66]	0.17	0.10	[-0.04, 0.37]
	$R^2 = .10$			$R^2 = .09$		
	$F(5, 619) = 14.33, p < .001$			$F(6, 618) = 9.79, p < .001$		
	Effects		SE			Symmetric BCI
Total effect	0.28		0.12			[0.04, 0.52]
Indirect effect	-0.10		0.03			[-0.17, -0.04]

Note: *N* = 625. Symmetric BCI = symmetric bootstrapping confidence interval. Indirect effects are significant where the BCI does not include the value 0.

<sup>a</sup>1 = man, 2 = woman. <sup>b</sup>1 = men, 2 = women.

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

that it would be close to the average score in these measures. This result makes evident the influence and negative consequences of extraprofessional representation by sports media (Rojas-Torrijos, 2010), behaviors that require ending gender stereotypes—a difficult challenge if the media continues to use a discourse that reinforces their maintenance (Esteban Ramiro & Fernández Montaña, 2017).

On the other hand, an athlete’s gender influences the perception of the media’s representation of the athlete in Studies 1 and 2. In Study 1, the participants allocated to the man-athlete condition believed that the media valued the athlete’s capacity to a greater extent compared to the participants in the woman-athlete condition. Again, there were few differences between the groups, and the

scores were above average. Study 2 (focused on extraprofessional field) reinforced the findings found in Study 1, showing that participants allocated to the man condition believed to a greater extent that the media conducted a proper treatment of the news compared to those in the woman condition. This result supports our hypothesis as well as other research showing that when women athletes are presented in the media, the focus is usually on their feminine attributes instead of their capacity as athletes (Rojas-Torrijos, 2010). The data show that despite the extraprofessional treatment of sports media, they are still perceived as more appropriate when a man competes vs. a woman. This, in turn, suggests that sport has remained a masculine domain, and society’s perceptions of women

athletes and women's sports have changed very little (Lough & Mumcu, 2016).

Previous research proposes that when people violate traditional gender roles and stereotypes, they are perceived more negatively than people who do not (Knight *et al.*, 2001). In this sense, it would be logical to think that a man athlete presented in a counter-stereotypical manner (e.g., based on their physical attractiveness or personal life) in the media would receive greater social sanction and negative judgments than a woman athlete portrayed in a stereotypical way. However, it cannot go unnoticed that sport is a masculinized field from its origins where men have traditionally been presented, first and foremost, as athletes, and being an athlete is consistent with the conventional male role (Coakley & White, 1992). The effects of presenting athletes based on their attractiveness or personal life instead of their sporting competence could not be the same for men as for women because sport has traditionally been a discriminatory context for women (Hyre *et al.*, 2017).

Furthermore, contrary to our predictions, in both Study 1 and Study 2, the participants attributed more merit to winning a tournament in the woman athlete condition in comparison with the man athlete condition. Again, it shows a few differences between the groups. Despite the fact that tennis is considered a neutral sport in numerous studies, gender parity is one of the great pending challenges that the sports context will have to face in future. In Spain, women only represent 23% of the total number of federated athletes and 3% of the number of federation presidents. Also, in 2019, there was only a women majority of federated athletes in five of the 66 sports federations collected by the Yearbook of Sports Statistics: The sports dance (FEED), gymnastics (RFEG), equestrian (RFHE), skating (RFEP), and volleyball (RFEVB). In the remaining 61, there was more or less clear a majority of men members (Redacción Multideporte, 2021). Following the Stereotype Content Model developed by Fiske *et al.* (2002), women are traditionally stereotypically perceived as very warm and not very sportingly competent (vs. men). In this sense, a possible explanation for our finding would be that more merit is attributed to a woman when a news item reports on her triumph in the sports field because she would be defying the social role imposed by her gender. Therefore, the fact that more merit is attributed to women suggests that gender stereotyped schemes remain in force in our society and continue to undervalue women in the sports field.

In addition, the results of Study 2 reinforce and extend the findings of Study 1, showing that participants assigned to the woman condition attributed more sporting competence to the athlete than the participants belonging to the man condition. This finding is incongruent with our hypothesis and the results of Barthel and Aydtt (2016), who observed objectified woman photos on Facebook were rated as less competent compared to non-objectified woman photos. It is possible that in the social imaginary, a representation of the sports media focused on the extraprofessional field is still perceived as normal when a woman is the protagonist as opposed to a man, so it would stand to reason that the woman would be perceived as more competent than a man in this context (Musto *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, this result can be expected because the woman is succeeding in a historically masculine context, which is counter-stereotypical behavior (Hyre *et al.*, 2017).

Also, contrary to our predictions, participants who were allocated to the woman athlete condition reported higher consumption intention of sports media than those in the man athlete condition. This result is incoherent with previous data showing that nearly 30% of respondents say they have recently watched a women's sports broadcast, whereas almost 70% have not. Among those who say they

have seen women's sports broadcasts, tennis events are the most popular (29.4%), followed by basketball (16.2%), and soccer (14.3%). However, televised news and highlight reels continue to frame women in uninspired ways, making women's athletic accomplishments appear lackluster compared to those of men (Musto *et al.*, 2017). The media have argued that what the audience wants is coverage consistent with the stereotypical gender role (Kane, 1996), that is, women athletes described in a sexualized way. This would explain why media representation focused on the extraprofessional field of women athletes (vs. men) is associated with a greater intention to consume this type of media—because it would give an image of women congruent with their preestablished view of femininity. Also, another possible explanation of the relationship between the sexual objectification of women and a greater intention to consume media lies in a study from Morganson and Major (2014) about sexual harassment from the theory of sexual role spillover, which explains how people transfer gender-based expectations of men's and women's behavior to the work context (sexualized woman in media sport), even if such expectations are not related to work, which can lead to a greater consumption intention to media. This result presents some evidence of the persistence even today of certain gender stereotypes as part of a patriarchal society.

In this respect, Study 2 showed that sexist attitudes influenced the perception of media representation focused on athletes' extraprofessional field: Participants with higher HS scores attributed lower sports competence to the athlete and reported a greater intention to consume similar sports media in the future. Additionally, participants with higher BS scores considered the news story more credible, were more likely to think the media treated the news content of the story appropriately, and reported a greater intention to consume similar sports media in the future. These findings are consistent with previous literature suggesting that sexist attitudes contribute to discrimination against women and gender inequality in sports (e.g., Mudrick *et al.*, 2017; Whisenant *et al.*, 2015).

Finally, although the direct effect of the athlete's gender on the perception of the athlete's competition and consumption intention is contrary to our hypotheses, when the assessment of the content of the news item as a possible mediator (indirect effect) is analyzed, the effects are reversed. Participants allocated to the man-athlete condition (vs. woman-athlete condition) were more likely to consider the news content to be accurate, which was associated with a higher attribution of competence to the athlete and a higher intention to consume sports media in the future. This result is in line with previous findings suggesting that men (vs. women) are perceived as competent in stereotypically masculine domains, such as a sports context, regardless of whether they are sexualized or not (e.g., Barthel & Aydtt, 2016; Nezlak *et al.*, 2015). In this sense, although tennis appears to be perceived as gender-neutral, the broader sporting context may still convey a stereotypical male image. Therefore, even when men tennis players are portrayed in terms of physical attractiveness or their romantic relationships, it is possible that the male stereotype (e.g., athletic, competent, dominant) prevails in these situations, leading to their equal perception as highly competent. On the contrary, in situations in which the media presents a woman tennis player as a winner but reduces her to characteristics associated with her femininity (i.e., attractiveness and romantic relationships), it is more probable that the content about this extraprofessional information prevails because it is congruent with her stereotypes and gender role. According to gender role theory (Eagly & Wood, 1999), individuals tend to pay attention to information congruent with gender stereotypes. Therefore, it is possible that participants perceived the content of the news item as

less appropriate when a woman (vs. man) tennis player was represented based on extraprofessional aspects, ultimately questioning her competence as an athlete to a greater extent and decreasing consumption intention of this type of media. Likewise, this result could indicate the participants' attempt to defend the position of women athletes in the media, rejecting their stereotypical portrayal based on extraprofessional aspects compared to men athletes. However, further research is needed in this area to confirm these assumptions. Besides, although these findings represent an advance in the literature, it is important to keep in mind that no firm conclusions can be drawn from our results because the explained variance of our models shows low values.

Despite the promising results of this study, notably it has several limitations that can most certainly be rectified in the future. The primary limitation is the results' lack of generalizability; the study only concerns the sport of tennis. It would be interesting to replicate our findings of tennis by considering different scenarios and sports disciplines to analyze whether results are due to the experimental manipulations, or to the type of sport (feminized vs. neutral vs. masculinized), because some studies suggest that feature articles about athlete women gave significantly more coverage to women in "gender-appropriate" sports such as tennis versus "gender-inappropriate" sports such as rugby (Kane, 1988). Furthermore, it is important to treat the degree of precision and naturalness that the different fictitious news articles achieve with caution. While this experimental manipulation technique (i.e., a scenario methodology) seems to manifest some limitations, numerous researchers have utilized it in the field of social psychology, confirming its validity (see Sánchez-Hernández et al., 2020; Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020). This methodology is effective and has advantages, such as the desensitization of difficult topics to study (e.g., situations of discrimination and violence against women), the ability to collect information on less socially desirable behaviors, and establishing distance between participants and researchers (for a review, see Erfanian et al., 2020). Therefore, participants feel less threatened and more comfortable talking about their real opinions and perceptions of sensitive topics because they feel they are not being analyzed. Nevertheless, future studies should employ different and more ecologically valid paradigms.

Regarding the sample collection, we used non-probabilistic sample types in both studies due to greater accessibility to access the sample of both men and women in comparison to other methodologies. However, with this sample, our results are not generalizable to the entire population, so researchers should replicate our results by using random sampling and collecting heterogeneous samples to analyze the potential influence of variables such as ethnicity, cultural values, nationality, and political orientation. In this respect, research has shown that variables such as gender social norms and cultural values vary across countries, so it would also be necessary to conduct cross-cultural research (e.g., Constantin & Voicu, 2015; López-Zafra et al., 2008).

On the other hand, we used self-report measures to assess our variables of interest; thus, participants' responses may have been influenced by social desirability bias. Therefore, the interpretations of our results and conclusions drawn from this research should be approached with caution. Considering the sensitivity and social stigma associated with discriminatory situations, as depicted in our studies, future researchers should explore alternative methods or paradigms that are less overt and provide better control over social desirability bias. Similarly, the measures employed in Study 1 are single-item measures, raising concerns about their reliability and construct validity. However, it should be noted that we conducted a

second study, in which we replicated part of the results of Study 1 and incorporated multi-item measures whose validity and reliability have been demonstrated. In addition, we recommend that future studies be carried out in different contexts, such as at a gym or a sports science facility, which would represent a step forward beyond the perceptions of people belonging to the general population. Indeed, another limitation of this study is that we did not control for participants being athletes or their possible involvement in sports. This could influence the perception of the news and subsequent response to the measures of interest. Therefore, we will try in the future to solve this limitation by asking specifically this question of relevant interest for the research topic.

This research contributes approaches for understanding how the media influence the social perception of different sports news, considering different psychosocial factors such as the type of representation (i.e., focused on extraprofessional field vs. professional field) and the athlete's gender. This innovative research helps to raise awareness of the media's notable influence and provide adequate information about the values of equality within society. Likewise, it could hopefully help to reduce beliefs about existing stereotypes as well as discrimination against women, whether in sport or in any other field (e.g., professionally or in education; Bruce, 2012; Forsyth et al., 2019). To achieve this, individuals and organizations must also promote positive role models by including examples of women achieving success, not only in sport but also in education and the workplace. Besides, open discussion about gender role stereotyping should be encouraged as part of the education setting in all contexts.

In the Spanish context, some studies reveal a panorama of needed change, with an exhaustive application of the normative framework with a gender perspective in the sports field: sports federations must review policies and programs with a gender perspective, the federative management must be modernized to give greater visibility to women athletes, and there must be a greater number of women sports references (Leruite et al., 2015). A society that respects the rights of all people and promotes the necessary actions to advance equal opportunities cannot accept sport as an exclusively masculine space (Noche & García, 2005). The role played by women in sport is gaining strength around the world, and their presence, strength, and activity transcend stadiums. Athletes, coaches, sponsors, and other women who make their living in the sports sector are now leading the way in changing cultural norms and are proving that sports can be a springboard for societies to move forward.

**Supplementary material.** To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://doi.org/10.1017/SJP.2024.21>.

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**Data sharing.** This study's design and its analyses were not pre-registered. All research data and scripts are publicly available and can be accessed at the Open



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